HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

O H 31

BUCK, REUBEN W.

Interviewed by

Patricia Young

May 6, 1980

INTERVIEWEE: REUBEN W. BUCK

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

DATE: 6 May 1980

TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

PY: This is an interview with Reuben W. Buck for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on May 6, 1980 at two-thirty in the afternoon at the Desert Palms Convalescent Hospital on Valencia in Indio.

RB: Interview you had, I was impressed with the fact that you were interested in some of the earlier residents here. And you mentioned a few I recognized as having been here. And there were some others I felt whom you might also be interested in. For instance, Gloria Swanson used to lease a home in Palm Desert. It's called the Home That Laughs, spelled L-A-U-G-H-S. It was Olson and Johnson's home.

PY: Excuse me. Mr. Buck, could we close the door perhaps?

RB: Sure.

PY: Is that possible? Okay, let's . . .

RB: I know you were mentioning Bill Boyd, Hopalong Cassidy, you mentioned his home. Well, that's right. He built

that house there, and it's black and white. Also, one thing that was failed to mention was his swimming pool is in the shape of a gun, of a forty-five. I thought that was an interesting item.

PY: Could you mention again about Gloria Swanson? I don't think we picked that up.

RB: She leased a home here in the fifties that belonged to Olson and Johnson which was called the House That Laughs Built. Then there was a time when Palm Desert only included the part that's south of the Highway 111. The northern side was called Palm Village. And it wasn't until the late fifties or sixties that they called both sides Palm Desert. Now whether that would make any difference in what you want to collect or not as information, I don't know.

PY: Oh, it's good to have that information.

RB: Because some people may call you and say, well, I lived in Palm Village. Well, you could easily wonder, well, where was that. Well, it was the north side of the highway. Palm Desert was the south side. As the Henderson boys founded it. Of course, I knew Clifford, and I still know him. In fact I've talked with him recently and Carl and Randall, who are both passed away. I knew

their wives. I knew Marian Mark and Edna Henderson, which was Randall's wife, and Carl, wait a minute. I don't know whether Carl was married or not. I don't believe Carl was married. Randall was, to Edna. Well, at any rate, any of those questions that might enter your mind, I'm sure Cliff would be glad to answer. As you know, there are a lot of swimming pools in Palm Desert. Most of them were built by Pappy Hubbs, who was the head and still is the head of Homes Pool Builders. Red Johnson built some and he may have built the Shadow Mountain pool, Shadow Mountain Club. I don't know that. I do know that the Shadow Mountain Club used to be a strictly private club when I belonged to it. And later on the stockholders bought it. Then the Palm Desert Corporation took it back. Now it's more or less open to everyone. At the time I first came here, you had to be a member, you had to join the Shadow Mountain Club in order to own property here. Or vice versa, if you owned property, you became a member,upon paying the dues. (laughter) Mrs. Buck and I built the forty-ninth home and residence in Palm Desert proper which at that time was south of the highway. I remember because Cliff Henderson gave a party many years later called the Forty-niners party, and we were the forty-ninth. It was

one of the few parties Cliff himself gave. He wasn't a party giver. He was a wonderful guy, though, in my opinion. I like Cliff very much.

PY: When did you build your home?

RB: We built our home in fifty-one and fifty-two. It was a combination residence and small motel. It was on Shadow Mountain Drive.

PY: And it was all right to have a motel that close to the . . .

RB: We were right across from the club grounds, yes.

PY: Is it still there?

RB: As far as I know, last time I spoke with Mrs. Buck, it has been turned into offices of some kind. It was just near the corner of, what's that street up there, San Luis Rey?

PY: Yes.

RB: Yes. It was just one lot east of that. And then there was Mrs. Werner's, Henrietta Werner had the Shadow Mountain Terrace. And then in back of our place was Gates of the Desert, which was built by Dr. and Mrs. Gates. And then the Larae Lodge further down on Larae, I forget who built that actually, but that was the third one in that area. Palm Desert Adobe was built some time before that, though. And Firecliff, of course, belonged to

Cliff Henderson and Leonard Firestone. That's where it got its name. Fire for Firestone and Cliff for Clifford. So it's a combination of their two names. And then there was Bob Sturgeon's Twin Palms Motel and Apartments. The others were all built after that. Bob Sturgeon's was built before we built. I'm sorry I didn't put that in at first. Twin Palms it was called. Now I don't know whether Bob's still living now or not. He was very ill for a long time.

PY: For all of those residences, it seems like there must have been a lot of people coming to Palm Desert. Is that true?

RB: Yes, both summer and winter. Although the effort to interest people in the desert in the summer was a very difficult thing to do and we weren't too blessed with business and/or tourists in the summer.

PY: But things were not closing down. Is that what you're saying?

RB: Some did and some didn't. Some closed and some didn't. We stayed open all year round. Firecliff stayed open all year round. Mrs. Werner's Shadow Mountain Terrace stayed open all year round. The First Community Church in Palm Desert was located at the eastern end of Shadow

Mountain Drive and Portola. And it was built by Cliff Henderson. Dr. McCartney was the pastor there. It was right across the street from the first school in Palm Desert, the first elementary school. Whether there's been another school built or not, I can't say. And I didn't know we were going to be talking on tape, so I don't know how much you want me to talk.

PY: Oh, just continue. Anything that comes up feel free to talk.

RB: I just didn't want to waste your tape.

PY: Don't worry about the tape. It's cheap. If anything, it's the cheapest.

RB: Okay. But the life at that time in Palm Desert was concentrated a great deal on the social activities at the old Shadow Mountain Club. And the Shadow Mountain Club has changed, both in appearance and in membership, I imagine, because at that time, as I said, it was a property owner's club. And Cliff was the guiding light. Eugene C. Roberts built a great many of the homes in Palm Desert. He built the Sun Lodges, for instance, the original Sun Lodges. And I mean, when I say built, he was the construction company that built them. And Eugene still lives on the desert today, and he would be a great source, I imagine, of information for your

historical society and might have a much better memory than I for a great many names and dates. There was also Bob Ellsworth in Palm Village, had a beautiful home over there and was here for many years. And then there was old Gillette Ranch, which was owned by Gillette originally. Now I don't know who owns it now. Herbert Pritzloff, P-R-I-T-Z-L-O-F-F, I believe, had the home across from Bill Boyd's. And also, trying to think of some other people. Oh, the old, the first Bank of America was where the old Desert Museum is now, was the first office of the Bank of America in the old building there of the Desert Museum. Then the Bank of America built their own building, as you know, later. And . . .

PY: And the Desert Magazine.

RB: And the Desert Magazine building is what I mean. That's where the first Bank of America was, in that building. And then after Randall didn't publish the Desert Magazine anymore there, Leland Quick took it over, the publication of the Desert Magazine. And Leland Quick had a home in Palm Desert named Quick Sands. And he later moved to the coast, I believe to Del Mar, in that area. The only grocery store in Palm Desert was when Andrews, Andrews Market, at that time. There was no restaurant in Palm

Desert. I may be repeating myself. Except the club and a restaurant. Wait a minute. Owned by a lady named Mary Ann. I believe that was located where Edith Morre's Dress Shop is now.

PY: On El Paseo?

RB: On El Paseo. And . . .

PY: What about Angelo's? Wasn't that there then?

RB: Angelo's was here, and then went out later. They were here at the time we originally came, yes. But they didn't stay in business too long after that; for some reason they closed up. And then another restaurant took over that property and modernized it. Angelo's closed; I don't know why. But it was excellent. People used to even drive down from Beaumont and Banning to eat at Angelo's. He had super Italian cuisine. And there were two filling stations, Art Field's Texaco and Jerry Malone's Union 76, period. And I remember when late at night you couldn't, after the club was closed, you couldn't find a cup of coffee between Palm Desert and Palm Springs anywhere. And Rancho Mirage was very sparsely settled at that time. I at one time lived shortly in Rancho Mirage. We traded our property for part cash and part home in Rancho Mirage. In fifty-five we disposed of

that and left the desert for a time. But I didn't want this to be just a history of our movements. But I do remember Rancho Mirage was not heavily populated then. Ron Button, I think, was a great deal responsible for the development of, further development of, Rancho Mirage. And he later became State Treasurer, as you may or may not remember. He was a corporation lawyer. And the center, I keep going back to it, but the center of activity was the Shadow Mountain Club, which is not necessary anymore. It's entirely different than it ever used to be. And once any club is open, wide open, to the public, it loses something that it has when it's a private club. And that's true anywhere. Now I do believe that Mrs. Randall Henderson can also be of help to you.

PY: I've talked to her.

RB: Sariah?

PY: Yes.

RB: And she knows a great deal about Palm Desert's early beginnings.

PY: Why did you happen to come to Palm Desert?

RB: Why?

PY: Yes.

RB: Well, we were living in Oceanside at the time. We were

practically washed out because the building of the jetty at Camp Pendleton caused a change in the ocean currents and washed out, we were right on the beach in our home, and it washed out our patio and back under our living room. And I had read about Palm Desert and I told Mrs. Buck, I said, "Honey, let's go see Palm Desert." There was an article in the Saturday Evening Post. And this was in fifty or fifty-one. And it pictured the club grounds, the Shadow Mountain Club grounds. And it had an article on it, and it appealed to us. So we sold our home there, and we had a motel in Oceanside also. And we sold it and moved over to Palm Desert. And started building our home and small motel over in Palm Desert.

PY: Let's stop for a second. I think they're about to serve.

RB: About our home being washed out in Oceanside. And we had it partially repaired and then it washed part of it out again. And then my next-door neighbors said, "Reuben, do you want to sell that house?" I said, "Yes, but I don't think it's salable." And we did put it on the market and had no success. And he said, "Well, I'll buy it for what you paid for it." And he bought it and repaired it and joined it with his property. Now it's

all one property on the beach in Oceanside. And . . . that was in the forties. That was in the forties.

It just appealed to us. That was all. When we read the article. And we enjoyed it; after we did move, we enjoyed every minute of it.

That and went to Glendale, and then we came back. And then we left and went to Arizona and now we're back.

PY: (laughter)

RB: It has a magnetism.

: The desert you're talking about, aren't you, Buck?

RB: Right.

PY: Right.

: Buck, you want your coffee now with your pink sugar?

RB: Yes, please, dear.

: Okay.

PY: Pink sugar?

RB: Yes. Well, that's the . . .

: Diet.

RB: Diet.

PY: Oh. Oh.

: Pink package.

RB: Saccharine. Comes in a pink package.

PY: Was it everything you thought it was going to be when you came, after just seeing an article on it?

RB: Yes. Because the article was very accurate. It listed it as a new development. And it didn't say anything in the article that I can recall that wasn't so. And I can't recall the article word for word, but it just made you interested in it if you were interested in anything other than the community where you were. We'd had quite enough of Oceanside at the time because we were there during the forties. And it was overrun from the base, the Marine base. We had been in the motel business and we weren't the type of people that wanted our motel just used, if you want to phrase it that way. And . . .

PY: I think your coffee is there.

: Yes.

PY: If you'd like it.

: Buck. Here's your coffee, dear.

RB: Oh, thank you.

: I'll see you in a couple of days.

RB: Okay.

: Take it easy. Are you feeling . . .

RB: This is Mrs. Pat Young, dear. Sorry I don't remember your last name.

: Elliott.

RB: Mrs. Elliott.

: I'm Alice Elliott.

PY: Hi.

: A volunteer. I'm just one of the gals that comes around and annoys every couple of days a week.

RB: You don't. We couldn't do without it.

PY: I'm sure.

RB: We couldn't do without her.

: Take it easy, Buck.

RB: Okay, dear.

: I'll see you.

RB: Okay.

: Bye, bye.

RB: Bye, bye.

PY: Nice meeting you.

RB: No, we found . . .

: Would you like a cup of coffee, dear?

PY: No, nothing, thank you. Thank you for asking, though.

RB: They are so sweet. They're really lovely. No, it was everything we thought it would be. We didn't expect it to be fully developed because the article said it wasn't. And the article spoke of it as a new development with a charming atmosphere and a lifestyle that appealed to us.

We had been in California ever since 1944. And this was in the 1950s. So we'd had ten years of California. We had lived in the Pasadena area. We had a home in Altadena. And we didn't want to live in Los Angeles proper, so we decided to leave that area. And it just appealed to us. That's the only true answer I can give to you. And we found it very interesting. And, oh, we had a lot of interesting guests at our motel, but there again, that's . . . I don't think you'd want that for the historical background of the town. Well, you did mention Bill Boyd, so you might be interested. Gabby Hayes and his wife Dottie spent a great deal of time here. And Gabby Hayes was in many of the old westerns, usually acted as a cook. And he's a thoroughly beautiful man. And his wife, they were old vaudevillians. And we loved them. They were guests in our motel for many a month because they loved the desert. And I recall that Gabby used to love the sun, but he became sunburned very easily, so he used to stand in the swimming pool and I'd smear Noxsema on his back. And he'd be able to stand it. Little things like that. I mean, you recall as you grow older and especially if you're blind. You live off memories and thoughts of the past. So they were a very interesting couple. The

Duncan sisters were frequent visitors to the desert and loved it. And at one time considered buying a home here, but never did. But they did entertain at the Shadow Mountain Club and at Firecliff, both. I don't know whether you remember the Duncan sisters or not, Vivian and Rosetta.

PY: No.

RB: They did the Uncle Tom's Cabin, opened at the Palace Theatre in San Francisco years ago. I'm showing my age.

PY: (laughter)

RB: And, but they were very popular here as entertainers. And also as guests of the city, and guests of Cliff Henderson and of ourselves. And, let's see, the Todd's Orchestra used to be the featured orchestra here at the Shadow Mountain Club. And Dottie Todd and, oh, I can't think of his name. They had a very beautiful orchestra. There was a time when all the waiters at the Shadow Mountain Club were Filipino boys. And they were very kind group and very nice. We loved them all. And still have friends among them.

PY: They've remained in the area?

RB: Some have, some haven't. Not too many. Alex Aquino who at one time was the captain of the waiters there,

has remained in the area. And then he went back to the Philippines and came back. They're living in, I think it's the north end of the valley now. I don't know just what street. But they did live near Tramway Village, which at that time was between Rancho Mirage and Cathedral City.

PY: How do you spell his last name?

RB: A-Q-U-I-N-O, Alex. He had two daughters, both of whom graduated from the College of the Desert. And one of them married a gentleman, by the way, by the name of Young. And they were both very interesting girls. Claire Aquino, the older daughter, was quite a vocalist. Her mother is still here. The girls live out of town now with their husbands. But Mrs. Aquino knew a lot of the people in early Palm Desert. They were very nice people.

PY: Was she also working at the club?

RB: No, not at that time. And I don't believe that Claire ever did work at the club, no. No. We became friends with them because they were friendly people and I've always been able to make friends more or less with people. I guess it comes from having been in sales work so long.

PY: Who else did you have staying at your motel at that point?

RB: Well, let's see, we had, oh, who's the man that introduced the song, "The Daring Young Man on the, oh, Walter O'Keefe and his family used to be guests of mine quite frequently. And I also had Groucho's . . . George Fetterman, Finneman, George Finneman. He was on Groucho's show all the time. But I didn't have him, I don't believe, more than once or twice. And Don, I didn't have too many movie stars. I don't remember, Don somebody. I cannot remember. We had some relatives of movie stars. More than just movie stars. And brothers and sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law and so forth of movie stars. Now Jimmy Stewart used to come to Palm Desert a lot, but he was never a guest of ours. But he was a guest at the Shadow Mountain Club many a time. And his wife. And, of course, Lucille Ball's brother was at the, I think they call it the Indian Wells Hotel.

PY: Yes.

RB: And she and, that was before she and her husband were divorced. And I think her brother was the manager of Indian Wells for a long time. In fact, he may still be, I don't know. I don't know. Desi Arnaz.

PY: Right.

RB: And sometimes it takes me a while to register, I guess.

PY: Did you ever spend much time over at Desert Aire?

RB: Yes. And Danny Callahan was the manager, and Danny moved down to Indian Wells, I think, or in that area. He may still be around here.

PY: He is.

RB: I love Danny very much. We're great friends. I haven't let him know I was back, by the way. But I like Danny. I went to the christening party for his child. And Danny has been a guest of mine. Not in the motel, just in my home. I like Danny and his wife. And I been a member, and still am, of the Desert Rotary Club. I have a lifetime honorary membership. It's good for the rest of my life.

PY: Were you one of the original charter members of that?

RB: I was not one of the original. There were about thirty-five when I was invited in, but Gene Roberts, the construction man, was a member and he proposed me for Rotary. And I went in in about 1953 or 1954. And I do carry a gold card, which is a lifetime honorary membership card. And that's one reason I know still a great many of the people, older residents, of Palm Desert. Of course, the Henderson boys,all three, were Rotary members. Bob Sturgeon as well as I represented the motel

and apartment interests in Rotary at that time. And then Danny Callahan, of course, as the hotel and airport. And I do think some of the older realtors can give you a lot for your historical society. People like Ted Smith, Hal Capp, Dick Kite, Jr., they can all give you a lot of information on the early residents and homes in Palm Desert. They're all good people and they're all friends that I know would be glad to cooperate with you, with your organization.

PY: What do you think the magic of the community was in the earlier days? And did that change?

RB: It was, the magic of it? Was the relaxed life of the desert. It wasn't as intense a life as it is today. It was thoroughly relaxed. (phone ringing) People were younger. Excuse me.

PY: Please, have some of your coffee before it gets cold.

RB: The, let's see, you asked me about who besides Gloria Swanson. There was Jimmy Stewart. Well, that's all except I told you about most of the movie stars came as weekend guests more than living here. They would come the weekend or stay for a week or two or a month or two in the wintertime, during the season. And there were very few summer guests, although there were quite a few

who enjoyed it in the summertime. But, what other questions do you think . . .

PY: I think I was asking you about the magic of . . .

RB: The magic was to me the relaxed life that it depicted in its advertising. And which truly existed here. You came down, you became a member of the Shadow Mountain Club. That was first. You bought property, but it really first. And then you built a home or didn't. And in the process you joined the Shadow Mountain Club. And it was, as I say, a very attractive club. And there you led a relaxed life and your business went along with it. Because your guests came for the same reason. Either to buy and to build or to just plain relax. To relax from their business cares, wherever their home might be, either Los Angeles or otherwise. J. F. O'Connor and Mrs. O'Connor were early residents in Palm Desert. Andrew Mosley, the head of Breakfast Club Coffee, were early residents. Bob Gibson and his wife of the Gibson Wine Company were early residents. And, oh, any number will come to mind sooner or later.

PY: Do you feel that, when do you feel there was a change in that community? Or do you feel there was?

RB: I think the change came as business grew and as the

government ruled out the privacy of private clubs.

PY: Meaning what?

RB: Could be no distinction between races. I think that began to change the whole complexion of the country. I love my fellowman, all of them, but some people were very strident in their beliefs. You know, they practically ruled out private clubs in the whole country. By that, I mean that anyone could be a member of any club, regardless of race, creed or color. And I think before that throughout the United States there was a great deal of racism. But I think that's when a community began to grow. But at the same time as you gain you lost. You see what I mean?

PY: I think so. Do you want to explain it just a bit further, though?

RB: I mean as you gain through the fact that everybody had an advantage the same as anyone else, you lost the element of privacy in a club or an organization.

PY: Do you think it changed also on the level of, you said, having more business in the area?

RB: Yes. I think increased business brought, of course, the business people. And I don't think that was detrimental. I think it's made the area grow. And air conditioning

has helped make it grow, too. Used to be just swamp coolers down here. In fact, there was very few air conditioned places in the early days. They were all cooled by the desert swamp coolers.

PY: When did air conditioning then take over?

RB: Just shortly thereafter. I had, for instance, I had a desert or swamp cooler on my residential roof and in the individual apartments I had individual air conditioners. So it was a combination. At that time very few places had the actual refrigeration. They had the swamp coolers, ninety percent of them. And as fast as refrigeration became popular, people changed to it because during the humid periods you're only adding humidity to the air to use a swamp cooler. And the humidity in Palm Desert at that time, I made a note of it at that time, varied between zero and twelve on an average. Now it's between twenty-five and ninety percent due to the increased sprinkling and the golf courses and the sprinkling of those. The increased number of swimming pools in the area; right in the Palm Desert area you have a tremendous number of swimming pools which, each of which adds moisture to the air. So if you have a high humidity, it's increasingly high because of the sprinkling of the golf courses and the swimming pools. And I think the whole change, as I

say, came about was beneficial in some ways, businesswise and perhaps not beneficial in the fact that it's no longer a quiet retreat area. It's a very commercialized area, which is still a good place to live. I prefer to live in it than I do in Los Angeles or even in Arizona.

PY: Why is that?

RB: Well, in Arizona the difficulty is even in, we lived in Green Valley, we built a home there. And the stores will have windows full of things that you need in building or in home life or home furnishing, but they don't have them in stock. They have to either be, usually what you want the most has to be ordered from Phoenix or from Los Angeles. In other words, more or less tank town. And that's true of Tucson. It's not true of Phoenix. And we lived in the southern end. We were just in Green Valley, which is just thirty miles from the Mexican border and thirty miles from Tucson. Halfway between. So as beautiful as it was, and it was gorgeous scenery, it wasn't a good place to live if you needed things from time to time.

PY: But how is that different from Palm Desert? You said Palm Desert . . .

RB: Well, we were so close to Indio, twelve miles, thirteen at the most, to Indio and Palm Springs. We were between

the two even then. You see, Indio was growing at that time. Indio is going to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary, I believe, this next week. And I'm speaking now of approximately thirty years ago. Well, Indio was twenty years old then. And so you could get anything, purchase anything you wanted in Indio or in Palm Springs.

PY: And different from Los Angeles in that . . .

RB: Well, some things had to be ordered from Los Angeles, but Indio usually had a good supply. And even in Palm Desert we had the Imperial Hardware Company and Houston Lumber Company for household furnishings and things of that sort. And we had Palm Springs for things that Indio might not have or that Palm Desert didn't have. Michael Bucino, who had the Bucino Interiors in Palm Desert, used to have the interior decoration department of Bullock's, both in L. A. and down here until he decided to go in his own business. And in a very . . .